

# REGRET AVERSION AND FOMO CYCLES: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF ENTRY TIMING ANOMALIES IN RETAIL TREND TRADING

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**Abstract:** In the microstructure of financial markets, retail investors have long faced a dual dilemma of the disposition effect and timing inefficiency, resulting in the continuous erosion of their wealth during trading. Although traditional finance, based on the Efficient Market Hypothesis (EMH), assumes investors are rational utility maximizers, numerous studies in behavioral finance have revealed the dominant role of psychological biases in investment decisions. This paper focuses on the two most fatal aspects of trend-following strategy—early-stage hesitation (inaction leading to a missed opportunity) and late-stage chasing at high prices—and, by combining Regret Theory and the concept of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), constructs a psychodynamic model to explain entry timing anomalies among retail investors. Using detailed micro survey data from 773 active traders in the Chinese futures market, our empirical results show: (1) FOMO is highly pervasive among retail investors: 96.99% of respondents admitted to experiencing the complete “observe–hesitate–missed-out–chase-high” FOMO cycle, indicating that this behavioral bias is not a sporadic individual phenomenon but a systematic market-wide one; (2) Regret aversion exhibits time asymmetry: in the early phase of a trend, investors display “inaction inertia” to avoid regret from Errors of Commission; whereas at the late phase of a trend, social comparison pressure and counterfactual thinking trigger intense FOMO emotions, leading investors to panic-buy to avoid the regret of missed opportunities (Errors of Omission); (3) The failure of stop-loss behavior (accounting for 42.7% of attributed causes) is the extension of regret aversion into the exit phase, as investors postpone the psychological pain of admitting mistakes by refusing to cut losses. Further findings indicate that although 90.7% of investors express a strong desire to learn technical analysis, it is the lack of disciplined trading plans (62%) that is the fundamental cause of the FOMO cycle. Our study suggests that retail investors’ losses are essentially the monetization of failures in managing “regret emotions.” The conclusion section proposes constructing rules-based trading systems to mitigate these psychological biases.

**Keywords:** Regret Aversion; Fear of Missing Out (FOMO); Disposition Effect; Inaction Inertia; Retail Investor Behavior; Trend Trading

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background and Motivation

With the rapid development of financial technology and a significantly lowered trading threshold, retail investor participation in global financial markets has reached unprecedented levels. According to the National Futures Market Trader Survey Report (2021), the number of individual traders in China’s futures market has been continuously increasing, and Internet channels have become the mainstream source of information. However, despite the drastic reduction in information costs, retail investors’ long-term profitability has not fundamentally improved. On the contrary, only about 10% of retail investors make profits, 20% break even, and 70% incur losses, which remains the norm among retail investors.

Among various trading strategies, trend-following is widely favored by small and medium investors for its simple logic—namely, “ride the trend, cut losses, let profits run.” However, both practical observations and academic research have found that retail investors attempting to execute a trend-following strategy often fall into a typical reflexivity trap: at the initial low-risk stage of a trend, fear of future uncertainty and the lingering memory of the previous loss lead them to stay on the sidelines; as the price rises and the trend becomes clearer, the regret of “not buying at the low price” prevents them from entering at the middle price level (Tykocinski et al., 1995); eventually, when the price enters an accelerating top-chasing stage, the surrounding “making-money effect” and media hype induce a strong

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), causing retail investors to enter full positions at the highest risk point, only to immediately suffer a trend reversal.

This phenomenon raises a core academic question: why does the rational principle of “buy low, sell high” systematically reverse into “buy high, sell low” in actual practice? Existing literature has mostly focused on the disposition effect (Odean, 1998) using account trading data, i.e., how investors manage their existing positions (selling winners, holding losers). However, there is relatively little empirical research on how investors initiate positions, especially the psychology behind entry timing. In China’s futures market, with its high leverage and T+0 trading mechanism, the amplifying effect of emotions on decisions is even more pronounced, yet micro-level behavioral data studies are still lacking.

### 1.2 Research Questions

This study attempts to use first-hand survey data to delve into the following core questions:

Prevalence of FOMO behavior: How widespread is the fear of missing out among retail investors? Is it an individual difference or a group phenomenon?

Mechanism of regret aversion: How does regret aversion serve as the core driving force behind the two seemingly contradictory behaviors of “hesitating to buy” (inaction) and “chasing after buying” (FOMO)?

Cognition-behavior gap: Why do over 90% of investors crave learning technical analysis, yet still fail to overcome psychological barriers? What role does the absence of a trading plan play in this gap?

### 1.3 Research Significance

The theoretical contribution of this paper is to construct a “Regret–FOMO dynamic model” explaining retail traders’ timing choices, which organically combines the psychological concept of inaction inertia with the financial concept of the herd effect. In practical terms, by revealing the psychological roots of retail investors’ losses, it points out that mere technical analysis training cannot solve the fundamental problem, offering new directions for investor education and trading system design.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### Regret Theory: The Battle Between Action and Inaction

Regret is a negative emotion based on counterfactual thinking, arising when an individual realizes that had they chosen a different action, the outcome would have been better. Bell (1982) and Loomes & Sugden (1982) introduced regret into decision models with the famous Regret Theory, proposing that individuals in decision-making not only maximize expected utility but also minimize anticipated regret. Kahneman & Tversky (1982) in their classic study distinguish two sources of regret:

Regret from action (Errors of Commission): The regret resulting from taking an action that leads to a bad outcome (for example, buying a stock that then falls in price).

Regret from inaction (Errors of Omission): The regret arising from not taking an action and missing a good opportunity (for example, not buying a stock that then surges).

Traditionally, people have believed that the pain of “doing wrong” is greater than that of “missing out,” leading to the status quo bias. However, Zeelenberg et al. (2002) show that this asymmetry is dynamic: only when feedback is long-term and persistent (for example, watching a missed stock rise sharply every day, constantly reminding “you were wrong”) does omission regret gradually accumulate and eventually exceed commission regret. This theory provides a solid psychological basis for explaining retail investors’ chasing behavior: early hesitation is to avoid “buying wrong,” and late chasing is to alleviate the pain of “missing out.”

#### (2) Financial Perspective on Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) was originally defined by Przybylski et al. (2013) in social psychology as a pervasive anxiety, worrying that others are having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. In recent years, behavioral finance scholars have begun exploring the role of FOMO in asset pricing. In bull market environments, FOMO is a key force driving irrational exuberance. Gupta & Srivastava (2020) found that FOMO is negatively correlated with financial literacy and positively correlated with herding behavior. When investors see peers achieving high returns, the mechanism of social comparison is activated, producing a strong psychological gap. In order to alleviate this relative social anxiety, investors force themselves to enter the market, even if rationally they know the price is already overvalued. This behavior is essentially an “emotional hedge”—buying to hedge against the psychological pain of “others making money while I am not.”

#### (3) Inaction Inertia and the Disposition Effect

Tykocinski et al. (1995) introduced the concept of “Inaction Inertia”: if an individual misses a highly attractive opportunity (for example, buying a stock at 10 yuan), they tend to refuse any slightly worse subsequent opportunity (for example, buying it at 12 yuan). This is because buying at 12 yuan would mean directly admitting the loss of the opportunity at 10 yuan, and the immediate regret salience from

“acknowledging the mistake” prevents the rational corrective action. This phenomenon explains why retail investors find it difficult to enter mid-trend—they wait for the price to pull back to the original low (anchoring effect), but the market often offers no such chance, jumping directly to a much higher level, at which point FOMO explodes and completely breaks their psychological barrier.

On the other hand, the disposition effect proposed by Shefrin & Statman (1985)—selling winners too early and holding losers too long—is a manifestation of regret aversion at the exit stage. Odean (1998) confirmed this with massive account data. From the perspective of regret theory, taking a stop-loss (realizing a loss) means converting a “paper loss” into a “real loss,” which is a severely painful commission regret. As long as investors do not cut their losses, they can self-deceive (through mental accounting) that the loss is only temporary, thereby avoiding the reality of a decision error (Shiller, 2000).

## 2.2 Data Sources and Descriptive Statistics

### (1) Data Source Description

The dataset used in this paper is highly unique and micro-level granular, tracking the behavior of 773 active traders Based on Huishang Futures Co., Ltd.’s 2019 client survey data . Unlike traditional exchange account data (which contain only transaction records), survey data can directly probe investors’ psychological states and decision motives, thus opening the “black box” of trading behavior. The dataset contains two main parts:

Micro survey data: A total of 773 valid questionnaires were collected. The survey covers dimensions such as trading plan execution, stop-loss habits, psychological biases (FOMO), full-position tendencies, and technical analysis demand.

Macro reference data: The Annual National Futures Market Trader Survey (2021) released by the China Futures Association is used for comparing sample representativeness and industry-wide characteristics.

### (2) Variable Measurement and Definition

To quantify regret aversion and FOMO behavior, we construct the following core variables based on the survey questions, and explain their definitions and validity:

FOMO Tendency: Survey question: “Have you ever encountered the following situation? There is a market move, you did not follow up in time, and by the time you decide to act, the move is over or there is no opportunity to follow up.” Definition: This situational question perfectly captures the regret of inaction (hesitation) leading to a missed opportunity and the subsequent willingness to enter late. We code “yes” as 1 and “no” as 0.

Stop-loss Execution : Survey question: “When a trade turns into a loss, can you cut losses in a timely manner?” Definition: This measures the investor’s self-efficacy in executing stop-loss. However, to correct for self-report bias, we calibrate it using the attribution analysis from a subjective question (Question 8) about the causes of losses.

Plan Discipline: Survey question: Investigates whether investors formulate a trading plan and their ability to execute it. Definition: An ordinal variable with three categories: 0 = no plan and no execution (fully emotional), 1 = plan exists but cannot execute (cognitive dissonance), 2 = plan exists and is executed (disciplined).

Technical Analysis Preference: Survey question: “Do you wish to learn technical analysis methods?” Definition: A binary variable reflecting the investor’s reliance on such “forecasting tools.”

### (3) Sample Characteristics and Statistical Overview

The descriptive statistics of the sample reveal the following significant features:

Extreme universality of FOMO: Among 773 respondents, 750 (97.02%) admitted to having experienced the FOMO cycle. This is a highly skewed distribution, indicating that “buying high and selling low” is not an individual personality defect but an inevitable human response in the market environment.

Widespread lack of execution: Only 293 respondents (37.9%) stated that they can formulate and strictly execute a trading plan. Over 62% of investors are in the state of “no plan” or “plan exists but not executed.”

Stop-loss cognitive dissonance: Although only 35.06% admitted in the objective question that they cannot cut losses, in the subjective attribution (Question 8), 42.7% listed “not being able to cut losses” as the primary cause of their losses. This implies a serious self-deception: investors subconsciously understand the importance of stop-loss but are unable to overcome regret aversion in practice.

High risk preference: 29.24% of investors prefer full-position trading. Such full exposure dramatically compresses investors’ tolerance for volatility, making stop-loss much more difficult (because even a small adverse move in full position causes huge psychological pain).

## 3. Empirical Analysis: A Deep Deconstruction of the Psychological Dynamics

### 3.1 The 97% “Hesitation–Chasing” Trap: Dynamic Evolution of Regret

The most striking finding is the 96.99% FOMO rate in Question 3. It reveals a complete regret-avoidance behavioral loop:

First stage: Initial hesitation and aversion to commission errors (t<sub>0</sub>): At the early start of a trend, the market is full of uncertainty. According to Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), investors’

sensitivity to potential losses is about 2.25 times that to gains. At this time, if a purchase leads to a price drop, investors would face the immediate regret of “buying wrong.” To avoid this psychological pain, the vast majority of retail investors choose to stay on the sidelines. This hesitation is not a rational risk-control measure, but paralysis driven by fear.

Second stage: Inaction inertia and anchoring ( $t_1$ ): As the trend confirms and price rises to  $P_1$  (where  $P_1 > P_0$ ), investors face two psychological barriers: first, the regret of having overlooked the opportunity at time  $t_0$ ; second, the anchoring effect, where their mental “reference price” remains anchored at  $P_0$ . Tykocinski et al. (1995) validated this: investors refuse to buy at  $P_1$ , because doing so would cement the feeling of “I missed the low price.” They begin to hope for a pullback to  $P_0$ , only to watch the strong trend continue without any such opportunity.

Third stage: FOMO outbreak and aversion to omission errors ( $t_{peak}$ ): When the price accelerates upward to its peak ( $t_{peak}$ ), the accumulated pain of having missed the opportunity (omission regret) finally exceeds the fear of loss. At this point, social reinforcement (through media reports, peers’ trading successes, etc.) plays a key role – seeing others profit (as evidenced by Question 10, where many respondents wanted to create a trading chat group) makes “not making money” feel worse than “losing money.” In order to alleviate this intensifying social anxiety, investors impulsively buy at the peak. This finding not only confirms the herd effect but also quantifies its ubiquity. A 97% ratio shows that, in the absence of external discipline, human nature can hardly resist FOMO.

### 3.2 Lack of Plan Execution: Catalyst of Emotional Dysregulation

A trading plan serves as an external constraint (a pre-commitment device) to suppress behavioral biases. The survey data show that 62.09% of investors (those with no plan or with a plan they cannot execute) lack effective discipline. Statistical analysis indicates a significant symbiotic relationship between the absence of a trading plan and FOMO behavior:

Lack of anchoring: Without predetermined entry criteria, an investor’s decision relies entirely on real-time market price movements. The larger the price rise, the stronger the impulse to enter.

Execution paradox: In Question 1, 356 respondents (46.05%) indicated “I have a plan but cannot execute it.” This reflects the classic self-control problem: in the “cool state” investors formulate rational plans, but in the “hot state” surges of dopamine and adrenaline take over the brain, and the rational plan is abandoned.

Data evidence: In the subjective attribution question (Question 8), 19.6% of respondents explicitly attributed their losses to “not following the plan or lacking execution ability.” This further confirms that retail investors do not lose money because they lack knowledge, but because they fail to act on that knowledge.

### 3.3 Regret Aversion at Exit: Neuroeconomic Explanation of the Stop-Loss Dilemma

If FOMO is regret aversion at the time of purchase, then stop-loss failure is regret aversion at the time of sale. According to the subjective question statistics, as many as 326 respondents (42.7%) blamed their losses on “inability to cut losses,” far exceeding the proportion (8.4%) that cited “lack of skill,” overturning the traditional notion that retail investors lose money due to insufficient expertise.

Pain of recognizing losses: Neuroimaging research by Frydman & Camerer (2016) found that selling a losing stock activates the brain’s pain center (the anterior insula). By not cutting losses, the account shows only a “paper loss”; once a stop-loss is executed, it becomes an irreversible reality and implies admitting that the previous FOMO-driven buying was a mistake. This double whammy – losing money and suffering a blow to ego – creates a very high psychological barrier to exiting a trade.

Conversion to risk-seeking: Kahneman & Tversky (1979) pointed out that when facing a certain loss, people become risk-seeking. To avoid a sure stop-loss, retail traders prefer to hold losing positions in the hope of a rebound. The 29.2% of investors who favor full-position trading further exacerbates this gambler’s mindset.

### 3.4 Technical Obsession and Attribution Bias

Survey Question 5 shows that 90.69% of investors wish to learn technical analysis methods. However, in the loss attribution question (Question 8), only 8.4% of respondents attributed their losses to “lack of skill.” This indicates a huge attribution mismatch: investors subconsciously believe that if they master a magical technical indicator, they can precisely predict the top and bottom, thus avoiding the pain of stop-loss and the regret of missing out. Essentially, their craving for technical analysis is a desire to eliminate uncertainty and avoid regret by improving predictive precision. In reality, no technique can remove uncertainty. This excessive obsession with technical analysis actually obscures the real problem – a lack of psychological control and sound money management.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Time-Asymmetric Regret Model in Retail Trading

Based on the above empirical findings, we propose a four-stage model describing the psychological evolution of retail traders during a trend:

**Latent Period (Trend Initiation):** Market state – price hovering at low levels, direction unclear. Dominant emotion – fear (fear of loss). Regret type – anticipated regret (fear of “what if the price falls after I buy?”). Behavioral outcome – inaction.

**Fermentation Period (Trend Confirmation):** Market state – price breaks out and rises steadily. Dominant emotions – anxiety and annoyance. Regret type – experienced regret (regret for “not buying at the low price”). Behavioral outcome – inaction inertia. Investors refuse to chase at the slightly higher price, hoping for a “pullback” to the original level, only to watch the price pull further away.

**Outbreak Period (Trend Climax):** Market state – accelerating upward trend, euphoric media coverage. Dominant emotions – greed and FOMO. Regret type – social regret. Seeing others (peers, news stories) making money while missing out becomes more painful than fearing losses. Behavioral outcome – impulsive buying. Often accompanied by going all-in, trying to “win it all back in one go.”

**Hostage Period (Trend Reversal):** Market state – price peaks and turns downward. Dominant emotion – denial. Regret type – avoidant regret (refusal to admit mistakes, refusal to stop-loss). Behavioral outcome – holding onto losses. Investors hold on until their capital is exhausted or they cut losses in despair.

#### 4.2 Micro-foundations of the Herding Effect

The 97% FOMO rate found in our study provides a micro-level explanation for the herding effect. Lakonishok et al. (1992) describe that institutional herding is often based on information cascades, whereas retail herding is more based on emotional resonance. When 97% of market participants are driven by the same psychological pattern (FOMO), market prices inevitably overshoot. This collective irrational behavior is not only the cause of market bubbles but also the basis for profits from contrarian strategies.

#### 4.3 Full-Position Trading and the Gambler’s Fallacy

In our data, 29.24% of investors prefer full-position trading. This is highly related to the overconfidence described by Barberis & Thaler (2003). Full-position traders often have a gambler’s mentality of “betting it all.” More importantly, full exposure amplifies emotional swings—under futures leverage, a 1% price move can cause a 10% or greater asset drawdown, which can instantly penetrate the investor’s psychological defense and make rational stop-loss behavior physiologically impossible.

### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Main Conclusions

Based on micro survey data from the Chinese futures market, this paper confirms that regret aversion and FOMO are the core psychological mechanisms leading retail investors to enter positions at suboptimal times and ultimately incur losses. The main conclusions are as follows:

FOMO is systematic: 96.99% of investors could not resist market temptation, proving that weaknesses in human nature are highly consistent in financial markets.

Execution is the bottleneck: Although investors crave learning technical analysis (90.7%), it is the lack of plan execution (62%) and the inability to cut losses (42.7%) that are the primary causes of losses. Retail investors do not lack “prediction” skills, but rather “discipline.”

Double regret trap: Investors enter late due to fear of losing (leading to missed opportunities), and hold onto losses due to fear of admitting failure. This mismanagement of regret emotions leads to inevitable wealth transfer.

#### 5.2 Policy and Practical Recommendations

Based on the above findings, we offer the following recommendations:

For investors:

First, establish a rules-based trading system: since human nature is unreliable, investors must rely on rules. They should formulate clear trading plans with mechanical entry and exit conditions to strip out emotional interference.

Second, restructure attribution logic: stop searching for “magical prediction techniques,” and instead focus on money management. Accept that “missing out” is part of trading costs, eliminating regret from inaction and thereby breaking the FOMO cycle.

Third, use pre-commitment mechanisms: utilize conditional orders or stop orders to set exit paths in calm periods, avoiding decision-making when emotions are out of control.

For regulators and intermediaries:

First, transform investor education: current investor education focuses on basic knowledge and regulations; in the future, it should incorporate trading psychology and behavioral finance content to help investors recognize their own biases.

Second, optimize product design: futures firms and brokers can introduce “mandatory cooling-off periods” or “risk alert pop-ups” in their trading software (triggered when clear chasing behavior is detected) to assist investors in making rational decisions.

### 5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study is based on cross-sectional survey data from 2019. Although the sample is large and representative, it lacks time-series analysis of actual trading account records. Future research could match survey data with investors' actual trading records to precisely measure market technical indicators (such as price deviations or RSI) at the times when FOMO occurs, thereby more accurately quantifying the degree to which psychological biases erode returns.

### Data Sharing Agreement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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